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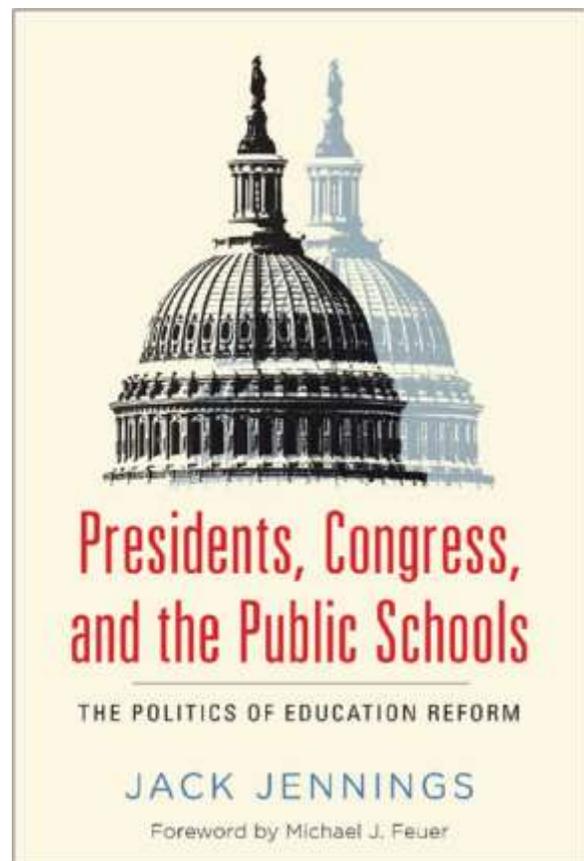
Jennings, J. (2015). *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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Federal education policy has taken a lot of heat as of late. The standards, testing, and accountability movement, the dominant approach to school reform under the previous four presidential administrations, has faced sharp criticism by policy analysts, education reform theorists and practitioners alike. Many contest the validity, wisdom, and usefulness of the approach (Lazarín, 2014; Power, 2004). The public, too, is dubious. The recent “opt-out” of testing campaign is a prime example. Given this widespread skepticism, it is understandable why some education experts on both sides of the political aisle advocate a reduced or severely altered role of the federal government in education (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2002; Ravitch, 2011). Longtime policy analyst and author Jack Jennings is not one of them. In *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform*, Jennings (2015) argues for the continued involvement of the government in education and offers a way forward for federal education policy – one that builds on its successes and



sheds its failures. His argument, though at times derivative and susceptible to oversights, is well-reasoned and not without its own critique of federal policy. Ultimately, Jennings presents an optimistic perspective that is easy to rally behind, if not fully convincing: the federal government wields tremendous influence and has the potential to ameliorate some of the most intractable problems facing the American public education system.

Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform is divided into four parts. The first section examines the roots, objectives and efficacy of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In part two, “Standards, Testing and Accountability,” Jennings shifts his attention to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and scrutinizes the accountability reform effort. In part three, Jennings describes and interrogates other federal policies that have had a significant impact since 1965, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975, bilingual education, school busing, Title IX, and free speech in schools. Jennings concludes his book by outlining his findings and recommending a way forward based on his synthesis.

Jennings is well-positioned to critique and recommend a new approach to federal education policy. He spent 27 years in Washington, D.C. as a subcommittee staff director and then as a general counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor. In addition to his experience on the Hill, his role as the founder and former CEO of the Center on Education Policy informs his findings. So, too, does the historical research he conducted as part of a project funded by the Spencer Foundation in the spring of 2014. This vast experience lends credibility to his analysis. For example, when he asserts that the two most powerful means the federal government has to effect positive change in our nation’s schools are through a) grants programs and the conditions placed on the receipt of those funds, and b) rulings of

the U.S. Supreme Court and lower federal courts, the reader is compelled to listen.

Jennings raises NCLB for consideration of the former, a grants program that has had tremendous influence. Regardless of one’s view of NCLB, and Jennings’ is balanced, one cannot refute its reach. From its passage in 2001 to its reincarnation in President Obama’s Race to the Top (RTTT) in 2009, test-based accountability mandates penetrated classrooms across the country as teachers, administrators and districts worked to implement NCLB or risked forfeiting associated funds. For Jennings, not only is NCLB illustrative of the power of federal policy, but it is also representative of progress. ESEA, the antecedent to NCLB, targeted a subset of students. Under ESEA, the government hoped to increase academic achievement by leveling the playing field for economically disadvantaged students. In contrast, under NCLB, all students are eligible for benefits regardless of race, income, ethnicity, disability and primary language. Throughout the book, Jennings’ defense of federal education policy hinges on its ability to pivot. If the government hopes to reestablish its credibility, it must continue to build on its successes. Although NCLB fell far short of its goal of all students testing at the “proficient level” in reading and math by the year 2013-14, for Jennings it is a success in that it expanded eligibility.

In addition to grants programs, Jennings identifies Supreme Court rulings as an equally effective national school reform mechanism. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed segregation of school children by race is offered as one of many examples of the power of the courts to improve our education system. Jennings cites *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* decision of 1973 and *Plyler v. Doe* of 1982 as additional examples. Further, Jennings incorporates these cases as evidence to support his call for a constitutional amendment which would make the opportunity for a good education a

Constitutional right. Jennings believes the legal recourse garnered would have tremendous and lasting impact, and he sees progress toward this goal in the *Rodriguez* and *Plyler* decisions. In *Rodriguez*, the plaintiffs contested school funding policies, arguing the practices favored wealthy communities and disadvantaged poor families. Although the court ruled in favor of the defendants, Jennings and others, including Michael Rebell of Columbia University's Teachers College, believe the court's decision contains a map for a future case that would prove students are not getting a good education as a result of the unequal funding system. In *Plyler v. Doe*, the Supreme Court struck down a Texas statute that withheld state funds for the education of undocumented children. The court argued children cannot control if they are in America legally or illegally. Jennings believes this same logic might extend to poor children who have no control over what type of family they are born into. Jennings is optimistic that these cases have opened the door for future cases that might result in the Supreme Court recognizing education as a fundamental right.

In the examples Jennings provides of grants programs and Supreme Court cases to effect positive change in our education system, the reader encounters a voice of knowledge and authority. It is surprising, then, that there are gaps in Jennings' analysis at the point where he outlines what some may consider to be the book's most valuable contribution: five recommendations to guide federal education policy into the future. (For a complete list of the guidelines see pp. 153–154.) Take for example Jennings' first recommendation: "The federal government ought to identify only important issues for federal policy since states and school districts will direct attention to those issues" (Jennings, 2015, p. 153). To illustrate this point, Jennings urges federal policy to focus on teacher quality, with the logic that states and school districts will then direct their efforts toward improving teachers. Specifically, Jennings suggests a national policy

which recruits teachers from the top third of college graduates, increases the requirements to enter the field, prepares teachers through a year of interning, and finds a more effective way of evaluating teachers. While Jennings may have aptly identified strategies to address teacher quality, he offers little in terms of new methods. Further, he overlooks the fact that federal policy has been focused on teachers for years. From the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* to the federal education policies it spawned including the NCLB and RTTT, improving teacher quality has been a top priority. Consider *A Nation at Risk*. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, the entity who generated the report, was charged with six tasks. The first of the six tasks obligated the commission to "assess the quality of teaching and learning in our Nation's public and private schools, colleges, and universities" (Gardner, 1983). The report's first recommendation in response to this task stated, "Persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching, and to demonstrate competence in an academic discipline. Colleges and universities offering teacher preparation programs should be judged by how well their graduates meet these criteria" (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983). The placement of teacher preparation and quality at the top of the commissioner's list is an indication of its importance. Teacher quality played an equally prominent role in NCLB and RTTT, and many researchers and policy makers have urged the federal government to address teacher quality as one of the most important means of education reform (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006). Clearly, our federal policy regarding teacher quality has been focused right were Jennings argues it should be.

With the exception of the second guideline, "The federal government has a range of ways to carry out policy, with some being more forceful than others," the

remaining three guidelines leave the reader equally unsatisfied. To be sure, Jennings makes a powerful case when he urges the government to leverage the courts and grants programs. The same cannot be said of his other recommendations, which come across as self-evident and unsubstantiated. Of course the government should establish appropriate budgets and avoid partially-funded mandates. Of course the government should build consensus. It is easy to outline what the government *ought* to do but much harder to identify why these “oughts” have not been realized.

Tracing the involvement of federal policy in education reform is fertile ground for discussion and analysis, and at times, Jennings’ approach to this topic comes across as derivative. Christopher Cross’s 2010 book, *Political Education: National Policy Comes of Age*, tells a similar story, as Cross describes the evolution of the federal role in K-12 education since World War II. Like Jennings, Cross draws on his experience and historical evidence to outline lessons forecasting the future of federal education policy. Joel Spring covers similar ground in *The Politics of American Education*; in their final chapters both authors call for a constitutional amendment, although Spring goes much deeper into the rationale and advantages of this potential reform.

Although Jennings’ ideas are not entirely novel and his guidelines for national school policy are self-evident, the book is worth reading. Others have called for a constitutional amendment, but this call bears repeating. Likewise, the hypothetical grant program Jennings spells out toward the end of the book, which he calls “United for Students Act” (USA), is worth consideration, especially for its budget and thoughtful changes to test-based accountability reforms. Specifically, USA upholds high expectations of all students and a commitment to closing the achievement gap while decreasing high-stakes testing. These modifications are right in line with President Obama’s declaration last October that the push for high-stakes testing had gone too far

and his instructions to school districts to cap assessments so that no child would spend more than 2 percent of classroom instructional time taking tests. USA, and the book’s overall contention, however, are not entirely in line with the recent supplant of NCLB in the new K-12 education law, the “Every Student Succeeds Act.” The law reduces federal involvement in public schools and grants greater authority to states and local school districts. One wonders how Jennings would respond to this latest development. Would he view it as the inevitable outcome of the current distrust of federal education policy or would he see it as an example of progress – a sign of the flexibility of national education policy to build on strengths and abandon failures?

In the end, the value of Jennings’ book might not lie where he intended. His guidelines leave the reader somewhat unfulfilled and, at times, his arguments overlook critical information. The book’s real value lies in Jennings’ optimism and in his steadfast commitment in the federal government to enact positive change in our schools. Throughout the book, Jennings challenges us to act boldly, to abandon incrementalism as an approach to educational reform, and to believe in the power and authority of the federal government to improve schools. Jennings calls for the hard fixes while acknowledging that his ideas “will not be accepted by all” and that they go against the “political tenor of the times,” yet he is compelled to tell the truth as he sees it (Jennings, 2015, p. 219). For Jennings, the way forward is to seek agreement on the big concepts, to build on successes, and to abandon what is not working. Ultimately, Jennings’ unwavering faith in federal policy, informed by his extensive experience, is contagious, and the reader comes away from the book holding a glass half full.

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About the Reviewer

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